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OLD DUXBURY SKETCHES

Sarah McFarlin

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there lived in Duxbury one of the picturesque characters now only memories in our New England towns, Sarah Mac. Tales of this odd person are still rife in the sturdy old town, once a part of the original settlement of Plymouth, but set apart as a township of its own in 1637, seventeen years after the landing of the Pilgrims.

Sarah Mac, or to give her full name, Sarah McFarlin, was born in Duxbury in 1739, and was educated in the town schools. A student of exceptional ability, she completed her education with honors and at once applied her talent to teaching during her active years meeting with great success and endearing herself by patient and painstaking endeavor to all of her pupils. Not until later in life did the peculiarities and quaint mannerisms which still cause smiles to those to whom memories of her have been handed down, show themselves.

At the opening of the century, in 1800, we find her then, without relatives, living alone in that section of Duxbury called Millbrook. Her little house, long since gone, stood on a little knoll on what is now known as Bradley's Corner. Approaching her sixty-first year, she lived on her small income and what she could get from the sale of eggs, berries and also milk from her one cow, Blossom, the name suggestive of a beautiful young and sturdy yearling. On the contrary, Blossom was a tough old scrawny veteran, whose sole pleasure in life was in kicking the mild pail or Sarah, herself out of the back door of the lean-to shed where she was quartered. These fights of "cowish" fancy did not disturb Sarah in the least for, one of her first poems was written in honor of Blossom, beginning:---

Oh Blossom thou are fair,
Thy coat is smooth as silk,
Thou wander'st here and there,
And give'st lot of milk.
A rather tame ending of a flowery start.

A POETESS

Sarah was a poetess. It was her proud boast that she could answer every question put to her in rhyme, without hesitation and indeed, she would not reply in any other fashion unless angry, when she wasted not the time for poetic responses but poured forth her soul with brevity. Her forlorn living was eked out by "visiting" so-called. Starting in the early morning she would make her appearance at the home of a neighbor and would spend the entire day there, helping with the housework or the

children, even working in the garden, labor of which she was especially fond: in her own words:---

I feed their cats,
I chase their bats,
I mind their brats
And kill their rats.

the last accomplishment finding no great competition among housewives, we may imagine.

Sarah, believed firmly in the "equal shares" policy of the Pilgrims. Fences, bars, gates and "no-trespass" signs had no effect in keeping her from walking where she want, or helping herself to whatever her fancy pleased.

The sandy soil of Duxbury had been found adaptable to the growth of cranberries, and Sarah being especially fond of them, kept herself supplied from the land and labor of others. One neighbor after repeated warnings without result, applied to the Constable who interviewed Sarah on the subject of trespassing. Her reply is still a by-word in the town:---

Men make laws but I don't mind 'em,
I pick cranberries where I find 'em.

Sarah's home in the fork of the main road to Plymouth and the road leading to the home of John Alden and the town shops, was convenient for visitors and many a way-farer, either a stranger passing through, or a friend on a shopping trip, stopped to rest on her porch. She was delighted to have them come, and was always ready to compose for them on any subject they might choose. Her home on the knoll overlooked the land of the Minister, Rev. John Allyn, a man who must have possessed infinite patience, as Sarah was prone to criticize and to argue and seems to have given the poor man many a stormy hour. She always attended both morning and afternoon service, and her unusual main retained every word of the sermons, about which she argued and debated during the following week whenever Mr. Allyn appeared in his year. She criticized openly his choice of garden vegetables and flowers, his method of caring for them, his mode of dress and even his new shoes, saying:---

On his feet, he wears new shoes,
Fancie tops and narrow tops.

We may wonder a bit just why 'shoes' should rhyme with 'toes' but Sarah appears to have been satisfied with poetic license.

Just before her death there appeared a monthly paper called "Sarah Mac's Budget" containing many of her humorous rhymes and comments. Although a hundred years have passed since the last one was published there are several copies still in existence.

Age and infirmity clouded the last year of Sarah Mac's life and we find in the Duxbury Town Records of 1829, an entry telling of her removal to the Almshouse and in 1831 the announcement of her death at that place. Several years later, two of her pupils returning to Duxbury and finding her grave unmarked, caused a handsome stone to be

erected and in Mayflower Cemetery, near the church where she worshipped, one may now read the inscription"

"In memory of Miss Sarah McFarlin, Died May Day---1831---Aet XCII. This stone in gratitude erected, by two of her pupils that her goodness respected."